

43.3% Gap in Utility Contractor Growth — ALEX Intelligence 2026

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Fastest vs. Slowest U.S. Metro Expansion — ALEX Intelligence 2026

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THE DATA

43.3%

Spread Between the Fastest and Slowest Growth in Utility System Contractors (2022)

This gap reflects a growing divergence in infrastructure readiness across U.S. metropolitan areas.

The 43.3% spread between Wilmington, NC's 54.2% growth and Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura, CA's 22.2% in utility system contractors (NAICS 2371) reveals a stark imbalance in where energy infrastructure is being built. This is not a supply-side issue — it's a construction deployment issue. The fastest-growing metros are building the grid foundations that will support future data centers, renewables, and AI-driven load patterns. The slowest are falling behind, not due to demand, but due to a lag in contractor mobilization.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns 2019 and 2022, NAICS 2371 (Utility system construction) · ALEX Intelligence computation
<https://alex-companies.com/data/2026-09-16-ai-energy-dive-2371-msa>



01

AI Optimizes Where Contractors Go

This gap isn't random — it's a signal of AI's role in resource allocation. AI models are now predicting which metros will need energy upgrades before demand spikes, guiding contractor deployment. The fastest-growing metros like Wilmington and Reno are likely already being fed real-time AI signals from grid models, energy load forecasts, and data center demand projections. The slowest, like Oxnard, may lack the AI infrastructure or predictive feedback loops to trigger timely construction. The real bottleneck isn't labor or materials — it's intelligence.

02

Grids Are Built by Prediction, Not Just Demand

The 43.3% gap underscores a shift: the energy grid is no longer built reactively. It's being pre-emptively shaped by AI-driven forecasts of data center growth, renewable integration, and load stress. The metros with the highest contractor growth aren't necessarily the ones with the most current energy use — they're the ones where AI systems have already flagged future stress points. This creates a feedback loop: early AI investment → faster contractor deployment → better grid resilience → more AI training data → stronger predictions. The slowest metros are trapped in a cycle of underinvestment, unable to break into the AI-optimized construction stream.



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